

# Fool Proof

By George Maguire

"**Q**UIITE a costly mistake Wilson," said Dodds, who had been with the company only two years. "Mr. Larkin must know, of course. You can understand that."

Henry Wilson raised his eyes and bifocaled on the plump, ruddy face, the slick hair, the plump pink hands so relaxed on the polished desk top. He said nothing. He knew that he was expected to say nothing. Dodds

hadn't finished talking. Dodds was never finished talking.

He had talked-talked-talked for two years. Wilson had heard his views on everything from accounting to zoölogy, re-iterated to the point of nausea. Henry Wilson began to tremble while Dodds, true to type, continued:

"Of course," Dodds said with his thin curling smile, "there is no ques-

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By

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tion of your honesty . . ."

Wilson dropped his eyes again, so that Dodds would not see the hatred in them.

It was not a new hatred.

For eight years he had worked hard, pursuing the office management always a bare jump ahead of him.

Then Dodds had come.

The whole complexion of his existence had changed with the advent of this plump, clever, airy young man with a consuming ambition. Dodds had robbed him. It was as if he had been tied in a chair and, gagged, watched a thief steal his purse, his prized possessions.

Dodds became office manager.

"Your error is understandable, Wilson," Dodds went on. "You've been working hard, and you probably tire more easily than you used to."

Wilson winced at this implied difference in their ages.

"When the brain is tired," Dodds said, "the hands become unsure. As I say, it is easy to understand how such an error could be made. It is harder to excuse it. But it's late, Wilson, nearing midnight. Run along. We'll discuss it tomorrow. Good night."

Dodds made a gesture of dismissal which almost upset a bronze vase. Wilson had been eyeing that vase for some moments while his mind arrived at a conclusion . . .

Wilson turned abruptly and went out. The pattern of procedure was suddenly clear, and it occurred to

him that his subconscious must have worked out the detail during these past unbearable two years. Each action, each word he must speak, were blueprinted on the top of his mind. He shucked on his topcoat, clapped on his hat, picked up his umbrella and went to the door.

He opened this and called loudly: "Good night, Mr. Dodds!"

That should carry through the silent building so that anyone who was still here should remember that Henry Wilson, head accountant for Larkin, Ltd., had checked out.

Dodds did not reply; or, if he did, the closed door of his private office muffled his voice.

Wilson walked down the corridor, stamping his feet with unnecessary force. He pushed the elevator button once, twice, three times in quick succession. That would irritate the operator, and he would remember that Henry Wilson had checked out, but wouldn't know the outraged sense of justice that had set his senses boiling.

The elevator boy, a stripling of eighteen, was resentful. "I heard ya the first time, Mr. Wilson."

"Eh?" Wilson said absently.

"Ya rung three times, di'n'cha?"

"Did I? I'm sorry. I was thinking. I really beg your pardon."

The boy gave him a lopsided grin. "Aw, 'at's all right. If ya dint mean it. I thought ya might think I was asleep, an' I wasn't. One ring'll always get me."

Wilson stepped out on the main floor. "I'll remember." He pulled

out his watch, gave an exclamation of surprise. "Eleven-thirty already? Good heavens! Well, good night."

"Good night, Mr. Wilson. Lotsa overtime this month, huh?"

Wilson stopped, halfway to the street door, and came back to the elevator. "That reminds me," he said. "Mr. Dodds is still in his office. I wish you'd run up and ask him if there is anything he wants. Some coffee, perhaps. I'm sure he'd be very grateful."

"Sure, Mr. Wilson," the boy said. "It'll help pass the time. I don't like to complain, but these nights pass awful slow sometimes."

"Thank you," Wilson said, and turned away.

The elevator door slammed shut, and the car was out of sight before Wilson reached the big double doors. He reversed his steps and ran silently to the stairway. He went up the first flight quickly, then took one slow and silent step after another. No need to hurry. He wanted the boy to get in and out of the office before he reached the fourth floor.

He looked down each corridor as he reached it. No offices were lighted. The janitors usually started on the top floor and worked down, arriving on his floor about three in the morning.

Long before then, he should be safe at home, asleep. *Safe at home.*

He stood on the stairway leading on to the fourth floor. The elevator was parked, door open. The boy was still in the office. Wilson waited calmly. He considered this calmness

with a detachment that seemed to separate him into two persons: one waiting on the dark stairway, the other watching him with analytical eyes. It was strange, this calm.

The boy came out of Dodds' office and went whistling into the elevator, sent it humming down. Wilson walked up the few remaining stairs, walked casually but quietly to the lighted door. He pushed this open without any attempt to keep it quiet and entered the waiting room.

"Who's there?" Dodds called through the private door, which stood one inch ajar.

"Wilson."

He went through the private door, crossed the big office and leaned against the desk, his hand about three inches from the bronze vase.

Dodds frowned. "What is it, Wilson?" he asked in nettled tones. "I'm very busy."

"It just occurred to me, Mr. Dodds," Wilson said in a dull, unemotional voice, "that I'm not really responsible for that mistake."

"It was your sole responsibility, Wilson."

"Yes, I know that. But my Aunt Lucy should suffer any punishment meted out for it."

Dodd's bright blue eyes widened. "Your——look here, Wilson, you'd better go home and get some sleep."

"No, I'm serious," Wilson insisted. "It began when I was six. I remember it as if it were yesterday, instead of forty years ago. You see, I was sent to the store to get a plug of Granger Twist for my Uncle

Harry, Lucy's husband. She gave me a note to Mr. Haskins, the storekeeper, because he wouldn't let me have tobacco otherwise. A lot of the neighborhood kids had procured tobacco from him under the pretext that their elders had sent them, with the result that an epidemic of juvenile illness had broken out. So I——"

"Come to the point, man," Dodds snapped. "This rambling reminiscence has nothing to do with——"

"But don't you see?" Wilson broke in, leaning earnestly across the desk and clasping his fingers around the neck of the bronze vase. "The storekeeper's name was Haskins, and that's the name of the account in which the mistake occurred. It was the result of a neurosis. You see, I bit off the end of the twist as I went back home, and I was really a sick little boy. Then Aunt Lucy whaled me for it."

Dodds' eyes shifted in annoyance, fixed on Wilson's hand clutching the vase. He started, half rose, and Wilson hit him on top of the head. The blow didn't kill him, didn't even knock him out. But it stunned him to momentary silence, and during that interval Wilson hit him again and again, until Dodds' face was running with blood.

Wilson went around the desk and felt for a heartbeat. His fingers found a soft, erratic pulsation which stumbled, fluttered, and died. He took out his handkerchief, wiped off the neck of the vase, and went unhurriedly to the door.

He considered his calmness once more. It was unlike him. Once he had been called upon to address a Christian Endeavor meeting, and he remembered the pounding of his heart, the dryness of his throat, the moistness of his palms, as he stood before those young people and looked into their earnest, vacant eyes. And there was the time when Lola Martin had consented to attend the church social with him. He remembered the hot sensation on his neck and ears as, with sailor straw hat in hand, he needed three tries before he could ring her doorbell.

And now he was as calm as——as——well, as Justice herself. He smiled grimly at the comparison. In a sense he was like that goddess. His eyes had been blinded by a sense of loyalty to the company, but the balances he held in his impartial hand had been tipped by the weight of injustice.

He stepped through the door into the reception room, and was halfway across it when Higbee, the night watchman, came in, in his khaki shirt and pants, carrying his watchman's clock, his young face reflecting a slight contempt.

"Leaving rather late, aren't you, Mr. Wilson?" he said.

Wilson stood stock still. His throat worked in an agony of attempted speech. He had forgotten the night watchman. A slip. Had he made others? His carefully prepared alibi was shot to smithereens. For here was Higbee.

Wilson had left the building at

11:30. The elevator boy had come in and found Dodds in good health. Somebody had stolen in later and killed him.

That would be the elevator boy's story. If suspicion attached to anyone, it would be the boy. *Would have been.* For here was Higbee.

Wilson's throat continued its convulsive movements. Higbee stared at him.

"Are you all right, Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes," Wilson said hoarsely. "Laryngitis. It hits me now and then. What do you want?"

"Why——why, nothing," Higbee said in surprise. "Just making my rounds, is all."

Wilson managed an apologetic smile, and his voice came back. "Of course," he said.

Higbee started toward Dodds' office, and Wilson moved to intercept him. "Oh——uh——Higbee. Mr. Dodds is very busy and wouldn't want to be disturbed, I'm sure."

Higbee shrugged. "Okay." He turned away and moved toward the entrance.

Wilson thought quickly. Higbee could place him on the scene of the crime, even though the elevator boy believed him to have gone. He couldn't let Higbee stay, he couldn't let him go. Wilson's flesh turned cold when he thought of the alternative.

He couldn't kill Higbee, too.

But——

"Oh, Higbee, wait a minute, will you?"

HIGBEE turned, with that slight contempt curling at the corner

of his mouth. He said nothing. He fixed questioning eyes on Wilson's.

Wilson cleared his throat. "Why——uh——I thought we might have a——well, a little talk. I have to wait here until Mr. Dodds is finished, and——ah——it's rather lonely just sitting. Don't you know? A man ought to have company."

"Say, are you okay?" Higbee asked warily.

Wilson chuckled. "Certainly. Ah, would you like a drink?"

Higbee bit his lip. "I'm not supposed to drink on the job, but——"

"That's the way to talk," Wilson said heartily. "Don't let bosses boss your private life. I'll get the bottle."

He started for the inner office, and Higbee said, in a more puzzled tone: "I thought he didn't want to be disturbed."

"Oh, this won't disturb him," Wilson said airily. "He may even join us."

He slipped through the door, opening it just enough to allow his shoulders to slide through sidewise, and carefully pushed the button on the knob which locked it on the inside. He went to a small cabinet on the other side of the office, keeping his eyes averted from the thing in the chair. The cabinet contained liquors for entertaining customers. Wilson selected a full bottle of Old Granddad and two glasses, took them into the outer office. Once more he opened the door barely enough to let him through, and watched Higbee as he did so.

Higbee had his eye on the bottle, and gave a low whistle. "Bond, hey?"

Wilson opened the bottle, handed it and a glass to Higbee, and motioned at a stand in the corner. "Help yourself to the water."

"With this?" Higbee said derisively. "Man, this is sippin' liquor."

He returned the bottle to Wilson, who poured a dollop into his glass and raised it with a flourish. "Health," he said.

Higbee returned the salute, tossed off half of the generous portion and sighed. "Boy, that's good stuff."

"Sit down," Wilson invited. "Be comfortable." Higbee selected one of the big green chairs, put his coat on the floor and sank into the overstuffed cushion.

"This is the life," he said.

Wilson appraised the situation rapidly. He had no plan. He was merely stalling. He couldn't imagine where all this was going to lead him. One thing was certain. He couldn't keep Higbee here indefinitely. But maybe—

A new thought struck him, and he considered it. It looked like a possibility. He smiled across at Higbee. "Drink up. Have another."

"Well—" Higbee said hesitantly. "One more won't hurt, I guess. But—He nodded at the closed door. "Won't he object?"

"Dodds?" Wilson exclaimed. "Not him. He's coming out and bringing a glass in a minute. He won't mind at all. Drink all you like, and if we finish this bottle, there's plenty more

where it came from."

Higbee poured his tumbler half full. "Say, Mr. Wilson, you're a pretty good old guy, you know. I always thought you were a crab, but now when anybody says that, I'll put 'em straight."

"Thank you, Higbee," Wilson said gravely. The small amount of drink he had had was now putting out tendrils of warmth which reached through him in all directions. "Frankly, I thought the same thing about you."

"Oh, I am a crab," Higbee said carelessly. "That's why I took this lousy job."

"I wondered about that," Wilson said encouragingly. "A man as young as you working on what is usually a job for men ready for the grave."

Higbee drank. "Well, you see, it's this way," he said with a confidential air. "I like people, see, but I hate crowds. I got my belly full of crowds in the army, especially on those stinkin' troop ships. Never alone, see? Besides, I got shot, and I'll have a stiff shoulder all my life. So I said to myself, I said I'd get me a civilian job where I didn't even have to look at crowds."

He poured himself another drink.

"Yes?" Wilson prodded. "Go on."

"So I looks the situation over, see. My, that's damn good liquor! And I find that almost every bastardly daytime job is gonna throw me in with crowds, even if it's only ridin' home on a bus with 'em. So I think to hell with it, and go to

work here. I like it. Hell, sometimes I don't see anybody for hours, and it's swell."

"A remarkable philosophy," Wilson commented.

They talked for awhile, with Higbee pouring one drink after another, and with Wilson not replenishing his glass. This went on until Higbee noticed it.

"Hey!" He exclaimed indignantly. "You're not drinkin'. Now I ass you, is 'at a way to do? C'mon, have one, fore I th'ow it away."

He got to his feet and brought the bottle to Wilson, with a suggestion of unsteadiness in his walk.

Wilson took the bottle. "Just a small one," he said. "I'm not a drinking man, really. But I can see that you hold it well. Doesn't seem to affect you in the least." He dribbled a few drops into his glass.

"Hell!" Wilson said loudly. "I c'n drink all night fie feel like it. Have nurr drink, pal. Buck Wilson drinks again!"

"Thank you, but I still have one." Higbee blinked. "Doan mine fie have one?"

"Not at all," Wilson said.

"Juss one more," Higbee said with sly cunning. "Juss one lil ole snort, hey Buck?"

He killed the bottle, and Wilson shuddered delicately. Higbee went back to his chair, fell into it, and stared owlishly at nothing.

"My ole lady said to me once," he began. "She said 'Lancelot'—ain't that a hell of a name for a guy?—anyway, she said 'Lancelot,'

the evils of drink is man — man, what the hell is that word—?"

"Manifold?" Wilson suggested.

"Thass it! Ole Buck Wilson!" He grinned fondly at Wilson. "Ole Buck! So—what the hell was I talkin' about?"

"Does it matter?" Wilson asked.

"Hell, no!" Higbee shouted. "Nothin' matters. You know what? I gotta feeling we oughta go'n celebrate. Wha' ya say, huh?"

"Finish your drink," Wilson said.

Higbee held his half-full glass up before his face and squinted at it. "Damn me," he said. "'Magine 'at. Yerp. Drink'er down, drink'er down."

He did. Then he fell gently forward on his face. Wilson watched his figure, bent forward at the waist, head hanging between the knees, for further movement. There was none. Higbee was out.

Wilson dragged the unconscious body into the private office. Sweat popped out all over him from the effort. Higbee was like a sack half full of wet sand; he was completely limp, an absolutely dead weight. Wilson puffed and grunted, finally managed to prop Higbee in a chair facing Dodds' corpse. He took the empty bottle and Higbee's glass and put them on the floor under Higbee's dangling hands. He washed and wiped his own glass, put it back in the cabinet. Next, he picked up the bronze vase, pressed Higbee's fingers around its neck, and let it fall to the floor. It made a dull thud,

tipped over, rocked back and forth a couple of times and lay still.

**W**ILOn surveyed the scene and found it good. Higbee's story would be tabbed as a drunkard's babble the next morning. Wilson looked at his watch. Twelve-fifteen. He, Wilson, had left the building nearly an hour before, and Dodds was alive after he left. The elevator boy would testify to that.

The elevator boy . . .

That raised a problem. Wilson's brow corrugated as he went into the reception room and thought the matter over. He was suddenly weak with fright, and almost fell as his shaking knees buckled. With a great effort of will he steadied his quaking muscles and forced his mind to consider the problem.

He had to get out of here. He thought of ringing for the elevator and sneaking down the stairs as it came up. He discarded this thought. That would mean that some third person had pushed the elevator button. He must keep people away from here until he was free of the building.

Then he remembered the elevator boy's strong insistence that he never slept on the job. Had he protested too much? Perhaps. At least it was worth a try.

He was calm again at once. He had an objective. He went out into the corridor and silently down the stairs, setting each foot soundlessly on the metal-striped steps. When he was on the first floor landing, he

saw the elevator boy slumped in a chair, and his snores came rhythmically to Wilson's ears. He descended to the corridor, halted while he thought of removing his shoes. He decided against this. Some chance passerby might not even remember him coming out of the building in a natural manner, but if he were carrying his shoes the fact would impress itself on anybody's memory.

He tiptoed swiftly but silently past the sleeping elevator boy, who didn't stir, and was outside in seconds. He walked unhurriedly along the sidewalk, which was crusted with a scurf of sleet, and entered a subway kiosk. He telephoned from a booth on the platform.

The elevator boy's sleepy voice answered after the phone had rung six times.

"This is Mr. Wilson," Wilson said. "Has Mr. Dodds left yet?"

The elevator boy's voice was thick with sleep, but Wilson didn't bother to listen. He knew all the answers.

"I wish you would do something for me," he said. "When I got home I remembered something I forgot to tell him. I didn't want to disturb him by calling his office, so if you will deliver this message when he's finished I'll appreciate it. Tell him the address he wanted is 144 Gray Street. Got it? . . . Yes, one-four-four. Thanks very much."

That was safe enough. The address was a Turkish bath, a natural enough location. If he were questioned about it, he would say that he occasionally went there—which was true—

and that Dodds had asked for the address—which nobody living could deny.

When he got off the subway at his stop, he walked a dark street that was different from what it had been before. The buildings seemed to whisper at him "You Killed Dodds, you killed Dodds" and hands seemed to reach from pitch-black doorways to clutch at his sleeve. He exercised all the will-power he could summon to prevent his feet from breaking into a blind, panicky run. He was shaking when finally he entered his room.

Before he even removed his hat he poured a large drink in a glass and gulped it. Then he took off his hat and coat and sat in a chair by the window. He forced all thoughts out of his mind, he tried to relax so that he could sleep. Sleep!

Would he ever sleep again?

He awoke with sunlight in his face, stiff from sitting in the chair, wet with cold sweat, shaking like a miserable cur. He poured himself another drink and began to breathe deeply. He had heard that deep breaths will take away that feeling of panic. They didn't.

But why was he frightened? He was safe. Long before this time Higbee would be in jail, trapped like a rat in the room with his victim. Drunk to the point of unconsciousness, all he would be able to mumble when he was awakened would be something about not remembering. Loss of memory was no defense.

Wilson bathed and shaved—cutting his chin twice—and went out for breakfast. The shakiness was under control when he'd finished. He went to work.

He walked completely around the block before venturing through the big doors. The elevator was crowded, and nobody gave Wilson more than the usual attention. One man who worked in a brokerage office nodded to Wilson, the others ignored him.

A policeman stood outside the office door. Wilson forced himself to walk casually toward him, forced a questioning expression eyes as he passed the uniformed guardian, who smiled a good morning. Inside the office were more policemen, and the entire office force.

A sharp-faced young man in plain clothes referred to a list of names in his hand. "Are you Wilson?" he asked.

"Yes," Wilson said quietly. "What——?"

"Then you're the last." The young man raised his voice. "Listen, all of you. I'm Captain Loomis, homicide. Last night an attempt was made to kill one of your associates, Carl Dodds."

A gasp ran around the group of office boys, stenographers, executives. Wilson added his, and it was genuine. Attempt? What did he mean, attempt?

Dodds was dead. *Dodds was dead.* DODDS WAS DEAD!

Wilson caught himself in time. He had almost shouted it as Captain Loomis searched the ring of

faces with his sharp gray eyes, lingering no longer on Wilson's expression of shock than on the others' similar expressions.

Loomis broke into the confused murmur. "As a matter of fact," he said, "the attempt was successful. Mr. Dodds was clubbed to death with a bronze vase he kept on his desk. And another man died last night, whom you may know. Thomas Higbee, the night watchman."

The murmur ran around the room again.

Wilson's jaw dropped. Higbee dead? He hadn't meant that Higbee should die. He didn't kill Higbee, he *didn't*. The man had been alive when he left.

"The watchman died of a heart attack," Loomis went on. "Nothing more is known at present. You will all consider yourselves at the disposal of the police until further notice. You may go now."

THE GROUP broke up, its members went their separate ways. Wilson went into his own office, sat behind his desk. He put his head in his hands and tried to stop his thoughts from whirling any more. "Nothing more is known at present." That couldn't be true. Something else was known. Higbee had been drunk. The bottle and glass would indicate that, and an autopsy would prove it. Higbee's fingerprints were on the bronze vase. Ergo, Higbee had killed Dodds.

Loomis was a man to watch. He'd almost tricked Wilson into admitting

he knew Dodds was dead. Perhaps his "Nothing else is known" was another trick. The best thing to do was to go about his business, agree that it was terrible about Dodds if asked, and say nothing to anyone if it weren't necessary.

His door opened. Loomis.

"Hello, Mr. Wilson."

Be careful. Be wary. He sets traps right and left.

"Yes, sir?" Wilson said.

Loomis sat down, crossed tweed trouser legs. "Couple of questions, Mr. Wilson. Afraid I'm going to be a nuisance to everyone."

"If I can help, Captain——"

"Good. I knew you'd take that attitude. Tell me, do you know what time you left the office last night?"

Be careful. Be wary.

Wilson pursed his lips. "Why, ah, I don't usually keep track of what hours I work. I'm on a straight salary, you know. When the job's finished, I go home. It was late last night, I remember."

"I——see," Loomis said. He referred to some notes. "The elevator boy says you left at eleven-thirty. Sound okay?"

Wilson shrugged. "If he says so."

"Very good. Now. What time did you get home?"

"It usually takes about an hour. Twelve-thirty or so, I guess."

"Can anybody swear to that?"

"I can," Wilson said emphatically.

Loomis smiled disarmingly. "I'm not questioning your word, Mr. Wilson. This is just a routine questioning. Everybody'll have to go through

it. I mean, did anybody see you get home at the time?"

Wilson hesitated, thinking furiously. Be wary. "I guess not. Not that I know of, anyway."

"You made a telephone call when you got home?"

"Yes," Wilson said readily. "I'd forgotten to give Mr. Dodds an address. A Turkish bath. I asked the night elevator boy to tell him."

"I——see," Loomis said slowly. "Did you call from your room?"

"No," Wilson replied easily. "I have no phone. I called from the drugstore on the corner."

Wilson's heart turned over. He remembered suddenly that the drugstore wasn't open that late. He sat perfectly quiet, waiting to be caught up, wondering what he would say. He found that he had clenched his hands in his lap, and forced his fingers to relax.

Loomis appeared not to have heard his answer, for he went on quickly: "You didn't get on so well with Dodds, did you?"

Wilson sat up straight. He set his mouth in grim lines. "You have no right to imply what you are implying. I had a great respect for Mr. Dodds. He and I got along very well."

"He sort of did you out of a job, didn't he?"

"He was a smart man. Mr. Dodds was an exceptionally smart human being. When I left him last night he was in the best of spirits. We chatted awhile and made a joke or two. Losing a position to him was

no disgrace. I admit I wanted the job of office manager, but I also admit that Dodds' being chosen over me was only just. And furthermore, Captain Loomis, I resent what you're driving at. If I killed a man every time I lost a position, my trail would be paved with corpses." Wilson smiled ruefully, his voice softened. "You see, I'm just a very ordinary person. It isn't hard to get the better of me."

LOOMIS smiled broadly and got to his feet. "Mr. Wilson, I want to thank you for what you've said and the way you've said it. I don't think I'll need to bother you any more."

Loomis went out, and Wilson sat for a full minute before he began to shake again. That slip about the drugstore could have been fatal. But then—he stopped shaking with the thought—the police were not always as infallible as the public was led to believe.

His next visitor was Mr. Larkin, fussy, graying, black broadcloth suit, white broadcloth shirt, black tie, black high-topped shoes, rimless pince nez.

"Ah, there, Wilson. Sad business, this. Very sad."

"It is indeed, Mr. Larkin."

"But we must go on. Dodds would've wanted it that way. Yes, the wheels of progress must turn, as long as there is a shoulder to put to them."

"Those are my sentiments exactly, Mr. Larkin."

"Good man. Dodds had a very

responsible position, Wilson. You've been here long enough to know that. Eh?"

"Yes, Mr. Larkin. I know."

Larkin peered at him over the edge of his glasses. "Think you could handle it?"

"Why, I—" Wilson straightened his shoulders. "Yes, sir, I know I can."

"The job's yours, then. Get your stuff together, move it into Dodds' office. Peterson can take over here."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Larkin. I hardly expected—"

"Nonsense." Larkin was moving toward the door. "You know you're the man, now that poor old Dodds isn't with us any more. On second thought, just go on in there and straighten out the papers on his desk. I'll have a boy bring in your stuff later. Keep your shoulder to the wheel, Wilson."

Larkin closed the door behind him, and Wilson allowed a smile to form on his mouth, in his eyes. So they needed Wilson to pull them out of a hole! If the pompous old fool had only done this earlier, Dodds would still be around.

The farther this went the funnier it got. All the books were wrong about the value of virtue, and good, and shining your shoes in the back. To get ahead, you either married the boss's daughter—or killed the boss.

He went through Dodds' waiting room and entered the inner office. He had to will himself to force his reluctant hand to the knob, and

remembered how he had slid through the door sidewise last night, to hide the dead body of Dodds from Higbee. He stepped inside, and the first thing that struck him was the smell of death. It was still in the air.

Then he saw it . . .

He gasped for breath, he tried to scream, but no sound came from his throat constricted by terror.

There in the chair where he had left it was the body of Tom Higbee, eyes wide and glassy, jaw slack, the bottle, glass, and vase on the floor.

Wilson turned and fled.

Peterson, his assistant, was in the reception room, and he stared at Wilson's wild expression. "What's the matter Wil—uh, Mr. Wilson?"

"In the office," Wilson babbled. "It's horrible. Oh, God, where's Mr. Larkin?"

"Here I am, here I am," Larkin said testily, coming in. "What in thunder is all the yelling in here?"

"Higbee," Wilson said. "In there . . ."

Larkin opened the door, peered over his glasses. "What in thunder's the matter with you, Wilson? There's nothing here."

Wilson turned slowly, unbelievingly. It was true. The chair was empty. There was no glass, no bottle, no vase.

"But I—" he began, then stopped.

Be careful. Be wary.

"I guess," he said slowly, "my nerves—"

"Understandable," Larkin said.

"Take the day off."

"Oh, no, sir," Wilson protested. "I'll be all right. It was just—oh, I'm under control now."

"Good man," Larkin said. "Peterson, you'll be in Wilson's office now. Carry on, men."

Mr. Larkin hustled away, and Wilson sat down at Dodds'—somehow, he couldn't regard it as his own yet—desk. He looked at the chair. He *had* seen Higbee. Or had he? Could the subconscious play such tricks? He must be doubly careful. A few more such slips, and people would begin to eye him with suspicion.

"Say, Mr. Wilson, you're a pretty good old guy, you know."

The voice came from nowhere, and everywhere. The voice of Tom Higbee, disembodied, hollow, echoing from one wall to another. It came from behind the print of Walt Kuhn's *The Blue Crown*, from the radiator, from the liquor cabinet, from under the desk, the couch.

Wilson's head spun wildly, his eyes darting from corner to corner. "Who said that?" he squeaked.

There was no answer.

Of course there was no answer, he told himself fiercely. There was nobody to answer.

His door opened. A pretty girl with dark hair, complete with hat and gloves, dressed in a black, tailored suit, widened startled blue eyes that seemed to be red and swollen from weeping.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she said.

Here was someone tangible, three dimensional, not imaginary. Wilson seized upon the event. "Not at all," he said with his most winning smile.

"I was looking for that young detective," she said. "I'm Mrs. Dodds."

"Oh," Wilson said uneasily.

"I guess he's around somewhere," she went on. "Do you mind if I wait here for him?"

"Well, I—"

"Thank you so much," she said, and came into the office.

"Excuse me," Wilson said, and went to the door. He called for the office boy, and when he came, said: "Tell Captain Loomis that Mrs. Dodds is waiting for him in—" He hesitated: "—in my office." He turned back, and suppressed a start. "Oh, but I think you'd find this other chair more comfortable."

She looked up gratefully from the chair in which he had left Higbee. "Oh, thank you, but this is all right, perfectly all right." She smiled sadly. "Carl would have been so happy to know how everyone is carrying on. They've all been so nice to me."

**W**ILOSON sat at his desk, in the chair where Dodds had died. "Mr. Dodds was a fine man," he said nervously, "a fine man."

"You're Mr. Wilson, aren't you? Carl talked about you often. He liked you very much. He—" A sob burst out of her throat, and she took a handkerchief from her bag and carried it to her eyes in a black-

gloved hand. Her smooth shoulders shook. "I don't know how I'll—I'll—go on without him."

Wilson was distressed. "Mrs. Dodds—you—you mustn't."

She raised her pretty face and gave him a brave smile. "No, Carl wouldn't have wanted me to do anything but go on as best I can, for my sake and the children's. Toby and little Mary. They don't understand. I tried to explain, but I just couldn't, I just—" She began to cry again, and Wilson restrained a desire to beat his forehead with his fists.

If she would only get out of here and go back to her brats. A man could stand just so much before he cracked. The door opened, and Wilson looked at the office boy as if he were a ministering angel.

"Captain Loomis wants to see you, Mrs. Dodds."

She nodded, dabbed her eyes, got up and gave Wilson a gloved hand. "You've been so nice," she said, and followed the office boy.

Wilson heaved a tremendous sigh, sat down and began pushing papers around in an aimless manner. Then he heard it again. It was an eerie whisper coming from nowhere, and his heart turned to a lump of ice.

"Wilson, the widow-maker. Wilson, the orphan-maker. How do you like it, Wilson, old man?"

Wilson held himself rigid. This was madness, this illusion of voices. No one was here with him, so no one was talking. The dead can't talk. His door opened again. The office

boy.

"Pardon me, Mr. Wilson, have you seen Mrs. Higbee?"

Wilson glared malevolently. "Get out! Am I everybody's guardian?" His voice rose. "Get out!" he squeaked.

"Okay, okay!" the office boy snapped.

He slammed the door behind him. Deplorable lack of respect for his superiors, Wilson found time to reflect, amid his trouble. That young man would bear attending to — all in good time.

"When the brain is tired, the hands become unsure."

Wilson spun in his swivel chair like a top at the sound of the voice. Why, Dodds had said that to him . . . last night . . . Was it Dodds' voice . . . ?"

"Yes, indeed, Wilson, and when the brain is tired, the *brain* becomes unsure. You realize that, of course. Your brain couldn't have been too sure, last night, Wilson. I wonder what you missed, what you forgot, what slip you made? Ha, ha, ha . . ."

"It's not true," Wilson told himself in a voice he was fighting to keep low and assured. "The dead do *not* talk. And Dodds *is* dead."

It was as if the spectral voice was listening to him.

"Am I dead, Wilson? Well, that depends. Death is a funny thing, as you're liable to find out before long, Wilson. Maybe we'll be in a position to discuss the subject together, eh? You always liked me, didn't you, Wilson? We'll have fine times to-

gether . . . fine times together . . . fine times together . . ."

The voice diminished as if fading into the distance. Wilson sat shaking in his chair. "It's gone," he chattered softly. "Gone. Maybe it never was—"

A voice whispered somewhere, another voice.

It was the voice which had preceded Dodds'.

"Two widows, eh, Wilson? What a score you made last night! Is it your life's work, or just a hobby, Wilson? Do you manufacture widows for the market?"

"Shut up!" Wilson cried. "Shut up, do you hear? There's nobody here, nobody talking, so shut up!"

"Shh! Not so loud, Wilson. You'll go off your nut. You've committed the perfect crime. Don't go balmy and spoil it. Softly, man, softly. They'll hear you. You don't want them to know that perfection is instinctive with you. Not a single plan did you make, eh, Wilson?"

"No," Wilson reflected. "Say, that's right, now that you mention it. When Dodds said he'd discovered my mistake, I started operating. I couldn't let it become known. And now I'm in a position to destroy all records on it. Say, that's right. Instinctive perfection, eh?"

"But," the voice whispered insistently, and now it was a woman's voice, "thou shalt not kill, Mr. Wilson."

Wilson's voice was just above a whisper, low on a decibel scale, but pulsing with emotion. "Voices can't frighten me. They deserved to die."

"Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt——"

"Stop!" Wilson screamed. "Stop! You're not real. I'm just imagining——"

His door opened. "Anything wrong, Mr. Wilson?" asked the office boy.

"Wrong?" Wilson yelled. "Do you hear them, too?" His face was flushed, his eyes like clear blue plastic. "No! Nothing's wrong. Now get out, *get out*, GET OUT, do you hear?" This ended on a shriek, and the door slammed, shutting off the office boy's frightened face.

Wilson dropped his face into his cupped hands and began to sob. His shoulders went through spasm after spasm of convulsive movement. "Oh, God!" he cried.

Loomis came in. Wilson raised tear-stained eyes to him, took off his thick glasses and swiped at his eyes with his coat sleeve.

Behind Loomis, a uniformed policeman said "Holy God, look at that face!"

"Take him away," Loomis said.

**C**APTAIN LOOMIS faced a little circle: the pretty brunette who had masqueraded as Mrs. Dodds, Higbee, Mr. Larkin, and the night elevator boy.

"I'm not like the old-time detective who beat the truth out of people," Loomis said. "We have a different approach these days, in some cities—in some precincts, I should say. Anyway, Higbee was found with the goods."

## SUSPENSE presents

Higbee said: "Whew!"

"His fingerprints were on the murderer weapon," Loomis continued, "and the evidence pointed to a drunken quarrel. But when he told me his story, I knew Wilson was the guilty man. The problem was to prove it."

"How'd you know?" Mr. Larkin demanded. "Looked open and shut."

"Yes," Loomis admitted. "There was a time when the evidence would have been overwhelming. But I like to listen to people. And when Higbee showed me that he couldn't move the upper part of his right arm because of his stiff shoulder—he was wounded in Germany—I knew he couldn't have struck the blow that killed Dodds with his

forearm only. Because, you see, the fingerprints were of his right hand, and that's the arm that's stiff."

"But—" Larkin began, and Loomis cut him off.

"Wait. It had to be Wilson, if Higbee's story were true. I decided to take a chance. So I had Higbee pose in the chair, and then talk into the ventilating system. That was a break, finding that 'When the brain is tired' proverb, stuck under the glass on Dodds' desk-top. You just know he was throwing it at the help here all the time." He smiled at the pretty brunette. "And you did a swell job pretending to be Mrs. Dodds, honey. You're terrific. I guess maybe that's why I married you."

Like so many other Hollywood film stars, Actor Gene Lockhart prefers working on "Suspense" over all other radio dramas originating in Filmtown. "An actor always gets a real starring part on 'Suspense,'" Gene says, "and beyond that, he has role with real 'meat' in it—something which enables him to get his teeth into and do a real job if he's any good at all. 'Suspense', to me, is radio's top show!"

## MORAL

*What to do with a corpse?*

This is a question  
That has plagued  
Adventurers  
Since Time spawned  
That perishable item,  
Man.

Morticians find it  
No nuisance, but  
Cain,  
Hamlet,  
Dr. Crippen,  
Landru,  
Hickman,  
Loeb & Leopold  
Tripped up because  
They had no hiding place,  
And solid flesh refused  
To melt.

There were many others  
Who learned the odor  
Of cyanide gas or the  
Texture of a rope  
When they tried to stuff  
A body down a drain or in  
A grandfather clock.

The moral is not moot:  
*Don't kill in haste.*

Reflection: fingerprints,  
Litmus paper, comparison  
Microscopes, bits of hair,  
Teeth, bones, buttons, flesh —  
These can lead  
Constituted authority to a  
Pinch.

Murder is so easy;  
Getting away with it is  
A chore.

— Honest John